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AUTHOR Leland, Bruce H.
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ABSTRACT

Just as student centered, collaborative classrooms give students the power to direct their own learning, so too a collaborative, partnership model for the writing staff leads to empowerment and professionalism. At Western Illinois University, involving temporary instructors in the process of curriculum development not only served to boost their participation in professional activities, but also increased their political involvement to the point where the provost of the university was considering them for tenured positions. The instructors contributed to the project by brainstorming; suggesting readings, exercises and paper topics; sharing examples of student writing; reading drafts of chapters; proposing changes; trying out material in classes; writing sections of the text; and contributing artwork. Participating in the struggle of creation, and working together on pedagogical problems and the application of theory Increased the instructors' interest in: (1) attending professional conferences; (2) subscribing to journals; (3) experimenting with collaborative learning and portfolio grading; (4) writing "Working Papers" based on research or classroom experiments; and (5) experimenting with methods of teaching writing with a computer. This professional activity, in turn, had the effect of increasing their political involvement through the "Instructor's Caucus," a group formed to work on issues of status, application of a contract, and other job issues. (PRA)

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Bruce H. Leland
Western Illinois University
Macomb, Illinois 61455

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Bruce H. Leland
Western Illinois University
Macomb, Illinois 61455

PARTNERS IN THE PROCESS: PROFESSIONALISM FOR WRITING INSTRUCTORS

I had imagined this paper with an analytic structure, outlining several related areas of faculty development. Then it was placed on a panel with the subtitle "Stories from Campuses." That happy choice of a subtitle made me realize that what I really had was a story.

And it's a story with a familiar pattern. The writing faculty at Western Illinois University, and writing faculty elsewhere, have engaged in a quest--we've been called out of the wasteland by the Wyoming Resolution and the CCCC Statement of Principles; we're facing countless enemies, many of them faceless, some of them ourselves; and we're hoping for at least a glimpse of the Promised Land.

I've been saying "we." Of course in my story I want very much to be the hero. I'm the Director of Writing at Western, safely tenured, with a literature specialization tucked away in my distant past, so my literature colleagues don't look at my work as a writing specialist as suspiciously as they might otherwise. The staff I work with, however, doesn't have that protection. Except for sections taught by TAs, the writing program is staffed by about twenty-two full-time "temporary" instructors. This quest story is really about their quest. My role is not as hero, but as cheerleader, prodder, supporter,

CS212782

even, occasionally, as one of the foe.

I need to go back only six or seven years to recreate the wasteland. At that time all members of the English department (literature and linguistics specialists) taught occasional composition classes, but the majority of the sections were taught by part-time MAs. Their part-time status was mandated by our union contract. It allowed only two years of full-time work for temporaries. So we subverted the contract by hiring people for their third and subsequent years at 3/4 time, paying them about eight or nine thousand dollars for teaching six classes per year. Despite good intentions about providing jobs and assuring program continuity, the department participated in creating the wasteland. The idea of meeting the spirit of the contract by trying to create tenure-track positions never even occurred to us.

Five years ago the union sought to expand its membership, and gained the right to represent the "temporaries." A separate section of the contract was written to offer them both salary minima and some measure of job security. Temporaries who completed two years of full-time service, and whose annual evaluation was satisfactory, were eligible to be placed on a re-employment roster. So long as temporary positions were available, departments were bound to hire people on the list first. They now had a "quasi-tenure" status, along with a negotiable salary.

We thought we had it pretty good, at least compared with

where we'd been. We were, however, in the role of passive recipients of gifts from outside the department. The changes had our support, of course, but they were, in fact, accomplished by the union; the department and the instructors had taken no real initiative and assumed no leadership. We weren't heroes yet. What's more, those first steps toward an improved status whetted our appetite. They revealed the possibilities for more. Maybe a lot more.

Just how much more became clear when we saw others joining in the quest. The Wyoming Resolution was a clear sign of encouragement, and the CCCC Statement provided a map for our journey. Specifically, the CCCC Statement outlined four paths to follow (though of course the four paths are pretty closely connected and they interweave a lot, so the quest analogy begins to break down--probably just in time. I'll abandon it for a while.) The four paths, I mean the four issues, defined by the Statement are job security, salary, working conditions, and professionalism. Job security of a sort was provided by the contract, even though it created the "permanent temporaries" decried by CCCC (I'll come back to that later). And salary, while still abysmally low, was also part of the contract package. We could try to influence it, though we had no direct control. Eventually we'd look for that control. In the meantime we were left with two areas to explore.

The issue of working conditions was addressed head on by the instructors last year. They formed an "Instructors' Caucus" to

work on issues of status, application of the contract, and other job issues. That group proposed a course load equal to the tenured literature faculty: a maximum of seven courses per year. They argued not only fairness but also pedagogical soundness, and they gained the provost's attention. Just a year ago he agreed to the seven course load. At the same time the instructors proposed a maximum class size of 22, taking on a fight that I had been fighting (alone) and loosing (alone) for years. To my amazement and delight, the Provost agreed to that too.

I see the instructors' initiative in pursuing the issue of class size and course load as a demonstration of their increased professionalism. Only a few years earlier, they would not have taken on that battle. At best they might have asked me to do the fighting for them. I tried, but, as I said, I lost. Since I was in the middle, it was easier for the administration to turn me down. The instructors would complain, of course, but they did nothing. Getting to the point of asserting their own legitimate demands and protecting their own professional interests was an important change.

It's how we got to that state (and how we're maintaining it) that I want to develop in some detail for the rest of this paper. My thesis is this: just as student-centered, collaborative classrooms give students the power to direct their own learning, so too a collaborative, partnership model for the writing staff leads to empowerment and professionalism.

When I became Director of Writing about seven years ago I

inherited a solidly top-down model of program administration. I worked with an elected Writing Committee (mostly "temporary" instructors), but apart from a couple of mandated responsibilities, that committee had as much or as little influence as I was willing to accept.

Now, I need to remind you again that I'm not the hero here. I didn't wake up one day inspired to give the power for the writing program to the instructors teaching it. In fact, as best I can reconstruct it now, my real motivation was a rather low one--fear. I had begun to explore some fairly wide-ranging curriculum reforms, re-designing the syllabi for our two required composition courses to reflect some current theory more clearly, and possibly moving the second course to the sophomore year.

This was a risk. I knew that I would face resistance outside the department (though I didn't predict the violence of the attacks I'd actually get!); to withstand that resistance I knew I would need the full support of the staff. I couldn't afford resistance from within. I also knew that a new unified program would only work if the instructors had a full commitment to it. To get that support and commitment I decided to get everyone involved from the start. So from those pragmatic motives I invited the writing committee to begin discussing several possible models for curricular reform. During a number of meetings and several drafts of the initial proposal, everyone on the staff had the opportunity to enter the discussion and make concrete contributions.

Furthermore, and even more significantly, the whole staff became involved in the preparation of the texts for the new courses we'd be teaching. We realized fairly early that none of the available texts would quite match our new goals for the courses, and that we'd have to develop our own materials. And though I agreed that I'd do the writing, I knew again that I would need the support and commitment of the staff. They wouldn't automatically accept my text. Everyone had to have the opportunity to get involved and feel some ownership. I can't hide the appearance that there was some manipulation here. There was. And it worked. But it did more than that. It became a vehicle for faculty development and professionalism.

In brief, the staff's specific involvement in writing the first text included brainstorming with me, suggesting readings and exercises and paper topics, sharing examples of student writing, reading drafts of chapters, proposing changes, trying out material in classes, writing sections of the text, and contributing artwork. In all there were twenty-seven members of the writing staff (temporaries and TAs) included in the acknowledgments.

The text project worked for the staff in the same way the text itself is intended to work with students. It provided a specific task to be completed, and allowed everyone to learn what they needed to learn in order to do it. Instead of presenting instructors with a completed syllabus and text, expecting that they then would welcome the chance to use it, I invited their

participation in the struggle of creation. We worked together with pedagogical problems and application of theory. As evidence of what was happening I've saved the pages of early drafts that became the grounds for extensive dialogue. The margins are filled with continuing discussions of points as wide ranging as the type of commentary needed accompany a student essay to the appropriateness of presenting Ong's theory of the fictional audience in a freshman textbook. And the contributions continue as the first book has gone into use. Staff members are writing applications of the book for the teacher's guide, suggesting specific things to change, and saving student papers to use in the revision. And at the same time we are starting work on the second book.

Several other development activities were going on concurrently with the curricular reform; some were related, others not. As we entered this period of change, I felt the need to keep everyone updated on developments. So I started writing weekly one-page memos to the writing staff. These included not only the usual local announcements, but conference news, brief reviews of journal articles, and reports on staff members' activities. With this increased communication, interest in all of these things increased. More and more faculty members started subscribing to journals, borrowing books, attending conferences, and making conference presentations. To accommodate this increased activity, travel money which had previously been reserved for senior staff members was released to instructors.

And those able to attend conferences reported on what they had learned to the rest of the staff.

Other professional activities have included experiments with collaborative learning and portfolio grading; writing "Working Papers" based on research or classroom experiments for circulation to the rest of the department; and collective experimentation with methods of teaching writing with a computer.

And even as they were doing this work with curriculum and pedagogy, the instructors were increasing their political involvement in the Instructors' Caucus. In fact, the Caucus is currently involved in revising procedures for evaluating teaching and working on a proposal for tenure-track positions for writing instructors. This last point is one of the most exciting developments we're facing. The Provost's interest in the writing instructors, once piqued, has continued. It was his suggestion that we consider tenure-track positions as a way to significantly increase the salary level for writing teachers. And the timing is right. The increased visibility of the writing staff is likely to make the tenured literature faculty sympathetic to the change.

The change will, of course, mean that instructors will be evaluated on research and professional activities, rather than just on teaching, as they are now. But that prospect, which may once have been terrifying to them, is now much less of a threat. The staff's involvement in professional development over the past few years makes further involvement look possible. It will

probably take a while, but we just might be able to do it.

And so it's at this point that the political involvement through the Instructor's Caucus and the professional development through curricular reform come together. I doubt that we could have been as effective in one without the other. The goal of the quest--the Promised Land--is in sight.

I'd like to end on that high note. Unfortunately, I can't. The sight of the Promised Land has brought the sobering realization that it's not paradise! We will get there at a cost, and once there we won't be eternally happy. The curricular experimentation is a risk, and whatever doesn't work will have to be redone, with a great deal of effort. Manipulating the changes through the university system has exposed us to increased criticism. Nearly every faculty member outside the department who has ever been frustrated by student writing has taken the opportunity to blame us. And while we have made some significant progress in working conditions, each step reveals the possibility for something better. If we can keep class size at 22, why not 20? And we face a struggle to establish tenure-track writing positions, and if we succeed more problems lie ahead. Not only will there be a new evaluation system, but there will be increased competition among the writing instructors. The collegiality created by common hardship will be lost. We know that being tenured is better than being temporary or part-time, but it does not usher in a golden age.

Finally, as Writing Director, I've found myself already

paying a price for progress. When there was little relief in sight for the instructors, each small thing that I could do--such as arranging a convenient schedule--was appreciated. They looked to me as their advocate, and though I was often ineffectual, they knew I was on their side. Now that they have discovered that they <u>can</u> both have a voice in curricular development and also work together effectively to improve their lot, they're not so sure. The staff generally wants to trust me, but there's a good dose of suspicion mixed in there too. Job related questions and problems don't get to me until they have been hashed out (and sometimes blown out of proportion) in a corner office somewhere. Things aren't so simple any more. The Promised Land isn't paradise for me either. But it is challenging and constantly exciting, and I have to conclude that all in all it's worth the quest.